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ABSTRACT

This brief paper suggests ways of involving students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficits in their own learning, with a systematic program intended to build self-understanding and a healthy internal locus of control. The program is based on the concept of multiple intelligences and the many different ways in which students and their peers are intelligent. The paper suggests that the program be integrated into the health science curriculum and be reinforced in all other academic subjects. (DB)

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# Teaching Students to Take Control of Their Learning

Patricia Long and Jean Bowen

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## Abstract

Many students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficits feel that they have little control over their environment. They often fail to make the connection between the things they do and the things that happen to them. The link between cause and effect is not made. This lack of understanding is often the result of repeated failures which cause students to build barriers of protection by becoming uninvolved in school. A cycle of failure results. This in turn produces poor self-concept and lack of motivation. The cycle can only be broken by successful experiences, but motivating students to re-visit painful experiences is not easy, and without motivation their is no opportunity to demonstrate the possibility of success.

One way of breaking the cycle is by carefully educating student about the process of learning, the system in which they are expected to learn and their own specific learning strengths and needs. This process of "demystification" can build competence and confidence resulting in internal locus of control and healthy self-esteem.

This paper suggests proven ways of involving students in their own learning with a systematic program that builds self-understanding. An important component of the program is introducing students to the concept of multiple intelligences, and helping them understand how they, and their peers are smart in many different ways. Such a program may be integrated into the curriculum though health science and reinforced in all academic subjects.

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# Teaching Students to take Control of Their Learning

Many unsuccessful students believe there is nothing they can do to change what happens to them. They may say and believe, "The teacher failed me because she/he doesn't like me." They do not make the connection between the things they do and the things that happen to them. Such students are often poor problem solvers and, at times, may appear passive, or openly confrontational and even aggressive. They rarely see the possibility of success and appear unmotivated. Their locus of control is external.

If we examine the successful student we discover a different profile. Successful students understand cause and effect. They know that the things that happen to them are the direct result of the things they do. They make choices based on their ability to anticipate results correctly. If they choose not to study and as a result fail a test, they make the connection between their choice and the consequences. They feel accountable and accept responsibility. If they pass a test because they chose to study, they own and enjoy the success. Motivated students practice good problem solving skills, anticipate results correctly and are motivated to do well academically. Their locus of control is internal.

The term locus of control refers to the degree of control each individual feels they have over the things that happen to them. Individuals with internal locus of control feel that the things that happen to them are the result of their actions. Individuals with external locus of control feel that the things that happen to them are the result of circumstances beyond their control. There is often a correlation between external locus of control and learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder.

Changing the poorly motivated student into a motivated student is a challenge to educators. One successful way of doing this is to lead students towards accepting responsibility for their own learning, but before they can be successful they must be prepared. Students must develop the problem solving and self-advocacy skills required for success. If we share with them information that has previously been beyond their reach, then we accept students as responsible collaborators. Educating them about learning in general and how they learn specifically, and explaining tests commonly used to measure intelligence and academic performance allows young people to make educated choices with confidence.

Training may start by examining the history of the way intelligence testing is measured. Students can be taught how and why Alfred Binet developed a test in France in the early part of this century. They can learn how and why David Wechsler developed the Wechsler Intelligence Test. In examining each subtest students can be challenged to transfer the skills measured to academic areas important in school. Because they have previously perceived this information as "confidential" and beyond their understanding, they are often quickly fascinated. Their new access to the "mysteries" of the testing process usually transcends hostility to school and the traditional view of education. Students may then be shown the process for standardized academic testing, and discuss how and why it is used.

Students may be introduced to a brief history of Dr. Howard Gardner's work at Harvard University and research and analyze the seven areas of intelligence that he defines as: logical/mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and bodily/kinesthetic. They may then be introduced to the work of Dr. Lynda Miller, who has developed a way of profiling multiple intelligences. Dr. Miller chooses to divide logical and mathematical intelligences into two areas. Students can be challenged to decide the logic and validity of this division. As they become more informed, they become more involved in the process. Old prejudices begin to fall away as they determine the areas of their own talents and those of their classmates. Understanding and valuing the fact that people possess different strengths develops team building skills.

Vocabulary used by the professionals in education may be addressed. Such terms as "standardized", "average", "functioning", "abstract", "age appropriate", and "attitude" may be defined. Students are drawn more and more into the "inner circle" of education. No longer are they subjected to situations where they do not understand the vocabulary or the concepts behind the words. Gradually, with this new knowledge, locus of control begins to change. Each student becomes the leading voice in the understanding of her/his learning needs.

As this new found insight begins to germinate, students may be asked to examine their own personal goals. Questions about long and short term goals, and curriculum needs may be addressed. They can be introduced to the concept of givens or facts, and how and when compromise is acceptable and/or productive. If their long term goal is to graduate from high school , how can they define the givens of their situation? Which givens are changeable and which are not?

How will they compromise, and what is their personal "pay off" for compromising? During the whole process students begin to take more and more control of their own learning environment. Because, for young people, school is the largest part of their lives, they begin to take control of their lives. The new sense of control comes from knowledge, understanding and a feeling of power.

Armed with these new perspectives, students are able to make choices that serve them in positive ways. They become responsible in selecting their academic goals, and therefore can be relied upon to make choices that will lead them to success. This new energy, understanding and knowledge reinforces the feeling of taking control. It begins to move the locus of control from external to internal.

It is important to provide students with a forum to demonstrate their new found knowledge to those adults who feature prominently in their lives such as parents and teachers. An ideal place for this is a student-parent-teacher conference. Such a demonstration must be carefully planned in order to be successful. Meetings and conferences do not automatically evolve in the required manner. Students must define their goals and plan and rehearse how the meeting will go. For example: 1) What do they want discussed at the meeting? They must decide on and prepare an agenda. 2) How will they establish that they are leading the meeting? They must consider the seating arrangements, and rehearse body language that demonstrates leadership. 3) How will they summarize and explain their test results? They must be able to speak confidently on each topic before they can explain to others. 4) If the adults present take over the meeting, how will they regain control? They must develop and practice language strategies that will allow them to bring the meeting back to their agenda. 5) What expected and unexpected reactions should they anticipate? They must develop phrases to successfully postpone discussion of topics. 6) How will they demonstrate that they are ready to take responsibility for their learning and their academic future? They must be prepared to explain and defend their choices. How will they bring the meeting to a positive close? They must know how to determine when the purpose of the meeting has been met. All these areas must be addressed and practiced beforehand. Using video is an excellent way of helping students feel polished and confident.

Training students to understand how they learn and what they need to be successful learners takes time, patience and determination on the part of the

teacher. A unit on self-discovery as part of a health science course can be used to integrate this valuable information into the curriculum. The results are rewarding for both student and teacher. Students who understand themselves and their needs can advocate for themselves and are motivated to succeed. They have a healthy internal locus of control which will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives.

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